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# Look before you jump

Kapil R. TULI

*Singapore Management University*, [kapilrtuli@smu.edu.sg](mailto:kapilrtuli@smu.edu.sg)

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# Look before you jump

## Coming to grips with the reality of eLearning.

*By Kapil Tuli*

In boardrooms all over the world today a scenario is played out again and again: Chief Learning Officers (CLOs) enthusiastically pitch the strategy of eLearning while chief executives remain sceptical over the outcomes. For years, eLearning appeared to be the perfect answer for corporations that need to train their employees. And it certainly has its advantages. eLearning lets employees learn anytime, anywhere, by delivering training over the intranet or the internet. It allows employees to learn on their device of choice, including computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones, at a time convenient to them. It allows learning to take place outside the four walls of a classroom. In addition, eLearning can lower the travel costs associated with learning and the costs incurred due to the significant time off taken by managers to attend classes.

What's more exciting, eLearning makes it possible, theoretically, for each employee to get precisely the training he or she needs, on any topic. An eLearning course can be customised to be of the precise duration and configuration optimal for a particular employee and pitched suitably for his/her level of understanding, whether this is in the form of modular courses or short five-minute videos.

The LinkedIn 2018 Workplace Learning Report found that in 2018, 71 percent of talent development professionals relied on eLearning programmes developed in-house to train employees, up from 58 percent in 2017.<sup>1</sup> That same year, 67 percent of talent development professionals relied on eLearning programmes bought from a vendor, up again from 49 percent in 2017. Unsurprisingly, analysts suggest that the eLearning market is likely to grow fast and become huge. For example, Technavio's market research analysts predict that the corporate eLearning market will grow at a compound annual growth rate of almost 19 percent by 2021.<sup>2</sup>

In 2017, enthusiasm for eLearning remains high among CLOs: 53 percent of them see these technologies as an important asset in employee training and 57 percent of them foresee an increase in eLearning budgets.<sup>3</sup> This enthusiasm contrasts with analysts’ predictions that eLearning budgets are likely to fall to US\$33.4 billion in 2021 from US\$46.6 billion in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

Why the disconnect between the two sets of figures?

Perception versus reality

This divide is due to corporations waking up to the current implementation challenges of eLearning. The perception of eLearning is that it is easy, effective and engaging. It is commonly portrayed as a low-cost and low-risk option that is fast to roll out and effective in engaging millennial employees. The reality, however, is a little different.

First, top quality training content is expensive to produce. It takes a long time to develop an effective eLearning programme customised to an organisation’s needs. A team will have to devote a substantial chunk of time to determining the goals of the programme and creating an outline covering the important topics and modules. The team will then need to create a prototype and test it on a sample group of employees. Because of the time and manpower invested, an eLearning programme built from scratch is no longer quick or cheap and, hence, no longer low-risk. Another issue is employee engagement. While eLearning can yield sustained, deep learning among millennial learners, the programme could leave ‘veteran’ employees out in the cold.

Despite the initial high investment cost, developing an eLearning programme can significantly reduce an organisation’s in-person training time. For example, Vodafone adopted an eLearning approach in 2015 that provided almost 90 percent of total

training to its workforce of 130,000. This led to savings of almost £60,000 just on costs related to paper printing! Importantly, almost half of those accessing training programmes did so during non-working hours with 90 percent of the access occurring over the employees’ personal devices. This cut down on the time set apart for training, did not take the employees away or out of work, and allowed them to take modules at their own pace.

Before deciding to embark on developing its own in-house eLearning programme, it is important that an organisation ponders three questions:

**What:** What should your employees be able to learn from an eLearning course?

**Why:** What is the most effective motivator for your learners?

**How:** How can you make eLearning a positive experience for your employees?

eLearning is commonly portrayed as a low-cost and low-risk option that is fast to roll out and effective in engaging millennial employees. The reality, however, is a little different.

The “what” spectrum

The “what” of eLearning is about goals. What is your biggest priority for your eLearning programme? Do you want to impart skills or knowledge? What do you want your learners to get out of the programme, i.e., what abilities and skills do you want employees to have as a result of the eLearning programme?

The goals can vary widely. They can range from getting employees to remember things they have to know (knowledge), to imparting complex tactical skills or attempting to change mindsets. eLearning is likely to be most successful in delivering basic learning objectives like transferring codified knowledge. The first step in developing eLearning-based training is to identify the codified knowledge-based elements, because those are the low hanging fruit.

One can start by separating codified knowledge, or IQ-based learning material, from tactical learning, or EQ-based skills. An example of codified knowledge is Accounting 101, because there are very set rules as to what is debit and what is credit. The answers are linear and straightforward. Once codified, the pedagogy is scalable. Company rules, HR regulations, corporate history, product knowledge, Standard Operating Procedure training, as well as compliance with workplace safety and health policies and regulations are topics that can be easily translated into eLearning courses

for sustained, deep learning. This is because codified knowledge requires little judgement-based activities and is based more on memorisation skills.

Corporations should develop programmes according to the seniority of their target audience. For more junior employees, the emphasis should be more on memory-based abilities. Still, in order for this knowledge to ‘stick’, the pedagogical content library must keep the employees’ interest (or, at least, they must be incentivised to retain it).

The next level of learning—tactical learning—is more complex and harder to effect through eLearning. Examples of tactical learning include leadership courses, communication skills, collaboration skills, effective sales skills, management strategies, change management strategies, and risk assessment training. Indeed, the bulk of training topics pertaining to roles like customer service is very much EQ-based. And unlike IQ-based learning material, EQ learning does not translate well into traditional rote-based pedagogy, which depends on memorisation. Teaching EQ through codification results in significant translation loss.

Training for soft skills is the top priority for talent development teams, according to the LinkedIn 2018 Workplace Learning Report. Soft skills include communication skills, listening skills and empathy. In the LinkedIn study, the three skills rated most important for employees to learn—leadership, communication and collaboration—are all EQ-based skills. Regrettably, at this juncture, eLearning is not the most effective way to impart these skills.

The last category of training—the target of changing mindsets—is where eLearning is least effective. Changing mindsets requires concerted, orchestrated organisation-wide effort. It must involve collaboration from all departments of the organisation and cannot be achieved just by education.

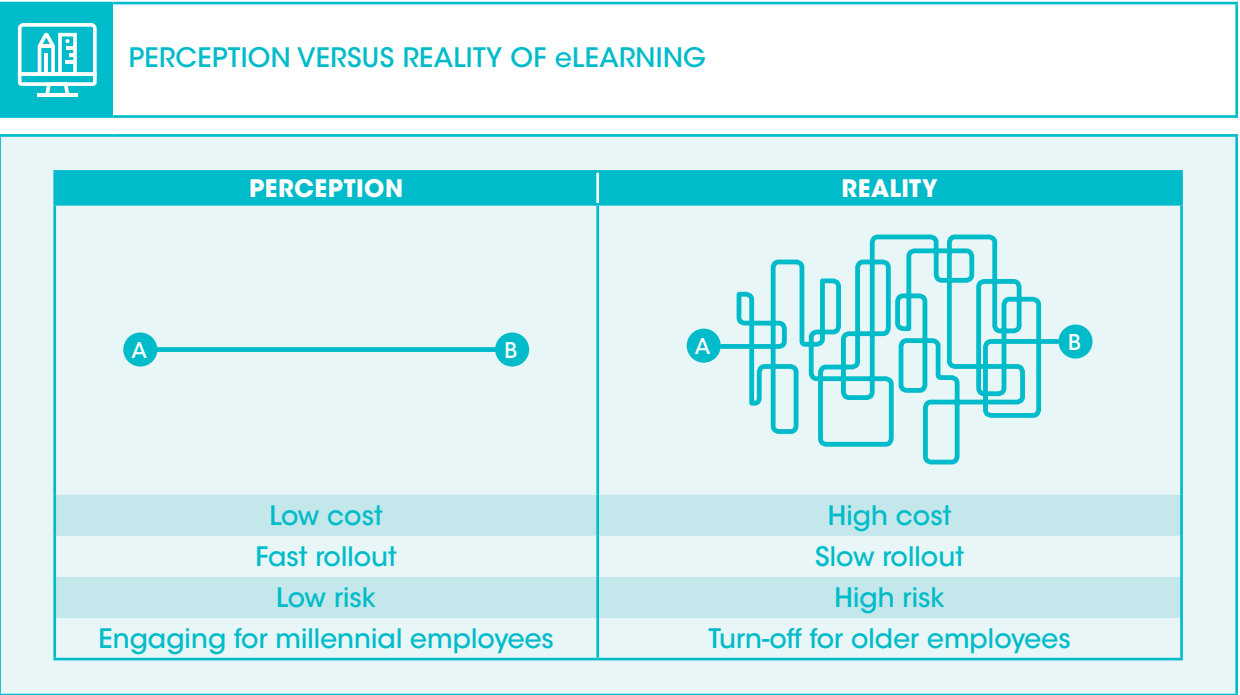


FIGURE 1

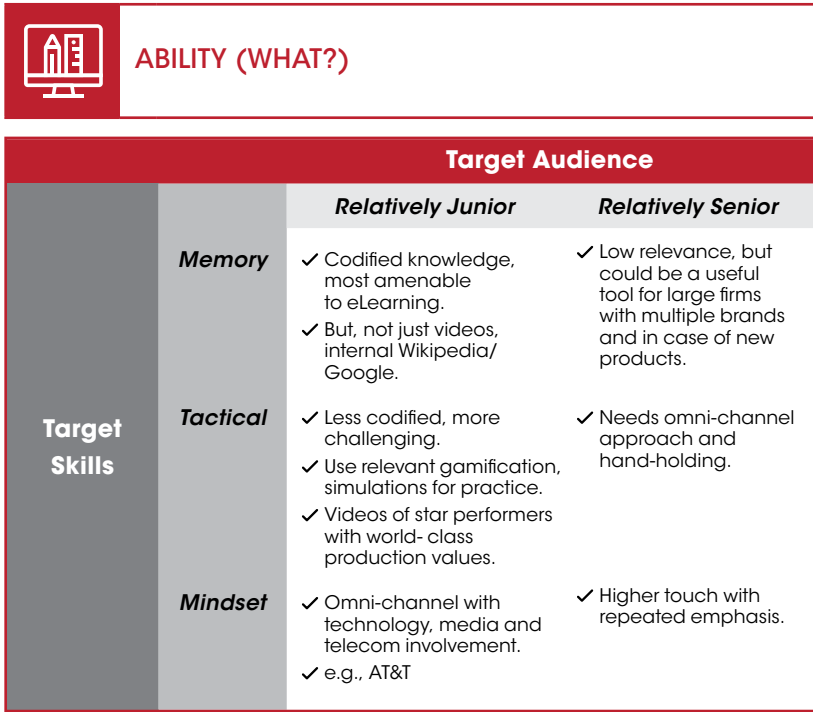


FIGURE 2



The ‘why’ often determines success

Another key question to ask is: How can employees be kept motivated and engaged? Try to answer the question your employees will have about why they should devote their time and energy to eLearning. When an employee asks: “Why am I doing this eLearning programme? Moreover, why am I doing this in my own personal time?” the answer will either motivate him/her to engage fully with the programme or only engage so far. The ‘why’ factor often determines the extent to which an eLearning programme succeeds.

Tactics used to drive an employee’s engagement with eLearning range from: (1) simply commanding employees to enrol (“Because the boss said so”) and (2) providing incentives (reward vouchers, promotions and certifications) to (3) embedding intrinsic levers (“It’s fun!”).

It is easy to order employees to be part of an eLearning programme.

However, this tactic only works for a short period of time. Like the proverb says: You can lead a horse to the water but you can’t make it drink. Incentives, on the other hand, work well both for the short- and long-term. Making eLearning a requirement for pay increments or promotions is easy to implement and effective. While the certification of promising employees beyond their current job is a tremendous motivator, it comes with a risk; employees may leave after obtaining the certification.

The most powerful motivating lever in getting employees to embrace eLearning is making it so much fun that they engage for the pure joy of it. Achieving this is tricky; it takes a combination of art and science to pull this off. You need the magic of movies and an understanding of pedagogy to make your learner’s eyes light up while learning. But when it succeeds, it’s a beautiful thing—your programme will both inspire and engage employees profoundly.

Examples of this are simulation eLearning and game-based learning. Simulation learning is highly interactive and relies heavily upon graphics, video and audio. It often incorporates custom-built videos or games, which could very well include 3D components. Game-based learning can be a powerful medium of experiential learning. Many organisations today are motivating employees to learn with game-based courses to lift their productivity and knowledge.

The thought-provoking ‘how’ question

How should you shape your eLearning programme? This question is intriguing. It opens up all sorts of possibilities. Do you offer training that is relevant to the last minute? Do you offer training customised for each employee? Or do you focus on training that entertains and one that employees can relate to? Whatever path is chosen, it is key that eLearning not be seen as a chore.

TIMELY TRAINING

Timely training is a priority in the retail environment. Retail sales and performance can be greatly enhanced by enabling in-store experts with unique knowledge about high-value products. Delivering up-to-date training in a timely manner about the latest gadgets, fashions or even experiences can help staff improve their interactions with customers and assist the firm in selling through. An example is on-demand content modules that quickly bring an employee up to date on a product line while the product is actively selling on the sales floor. Both Samsonite and Ace Hardware leverage eLearning tools that enhance product knowledge

among staff with the goal of providing consistent, knowledgeable customer experiences that increase sales conversation and sale ticket value.

Ace Hardware is not just one of the best customer service retailers but also one of the most helpful, which helps them to build customer confidence and trust. According to Retail Touchpoint, Ace Hardware employs a chainwide online interactive eLearning platform called *Helpful 101* to build their sales associates’ knowledge base and inform them as to how best to present their knowledge to confused customers. This is a role-based course with video scenarios, simulations, games, expert coaching sessions and online assessments. The programme includes activities that staff take to the selling floor to reinforce what they have learned online. While the hardware store may have a slower rate of innovation than some other industries, employees must complete a digital learning course every two years.

Samsonite relies on an interactive, easy-to-modify video training app platform called *QuizScore*. This platform moves digital learning out onto the selling floor through iPads that deliver non-streaming, app-based video training. Samsonite employees learn without leaving the sales floor by clicking on two-minute training segments that play immediately, efficiently increasing the employees’ product knowledge. Importantly, an added benefit of timely training is that it can enhance employees’ job satisfaction as they are better equipped to handle complex sales tasks. In turn, this timely ability could possibly lower employee turnover, a critical issue for retailers.

PERSONALISED TRAINING

The younger generation is used to personalisation and choosing their content across a wide array of interactions, whether it is social media, customisation of degree courses, or interactions with retailers. In addition, they are likely to be more actively involved in the consumption of media that they consider as being relevant to their personal and professional needs. As such, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to work in eLearning. In response, organisations need to consider how eLearning modules reflect and adapt to the current and developing needs of their employees.

In developing its eLearning safety programme for over 75,000 employees across 150 distribution centres, Walmart had to take into consideration the needs of four generations of employees: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. Each generation has a different level of computer literacy and learning requirements. Walmart was careful in ensuring that the platform was flexible enough to offer a personalised training experience for each generation according to their respective learning speed and specific focus areas. This approach, combined with gamification, lead to a reduction of almost 54 percent in safety incidents.

RELATABLE TRAINING

Relatable training is about producing relevant and targeted content that inspires and resonates with the audience. In this respect, HR departments can learn from a number of third-party specialists. An example is Masterclass, an immersive online learning platform that offers classes with the world’s best. Annie Leibovitz teaches photography; Martin Scorsese, filmmaking; Marc Jacobs, fashion design;

Garry Kasparov, chess; Bob Woodward, investigative journalism; Gordon Ramsay, cooking; Samuel L Jackson, acting and Serena Williams, tennis.

Each class includes pre-recorded video content, a class workbook, interactive assignments and community activities. Students share their thoughts, upload their performances and provide feedback on each other’s work. Each course consists of two to over five hours of video content. Individual lesson videos are from five to 25 minutes in length. Masterclass ups its interactivity factor by staging special opportunities for student participation. For instance, bestselling author James Patterson held a co-author competition and selected one student to write a book with him.

For HR leaders, the implication is clear. In a similar fashion, they can identify opinion leaders in their organisation such as leading sales personnel who can play the role of instructors in their eLearning programmes. That said, there is one caveat to this recommendation. Not all star performers are likely to be natural instructors or skilled at designing training modules. As such, it is important that HR leaders pay close attention to potential teaching skills and the willingness of star performers to share their insights and expertise with colleagues.

Putting it all together

Corporations have to realise that there are multiple benefits to eLearning beyond simple cost savings. For example, the employee turnover rate is very high in the retail sector. This means that management can’t afford the wait-time needed to schedule training time and again. Timely training gains importance for this segment. eLearning allows retail staff to become knowledgeable

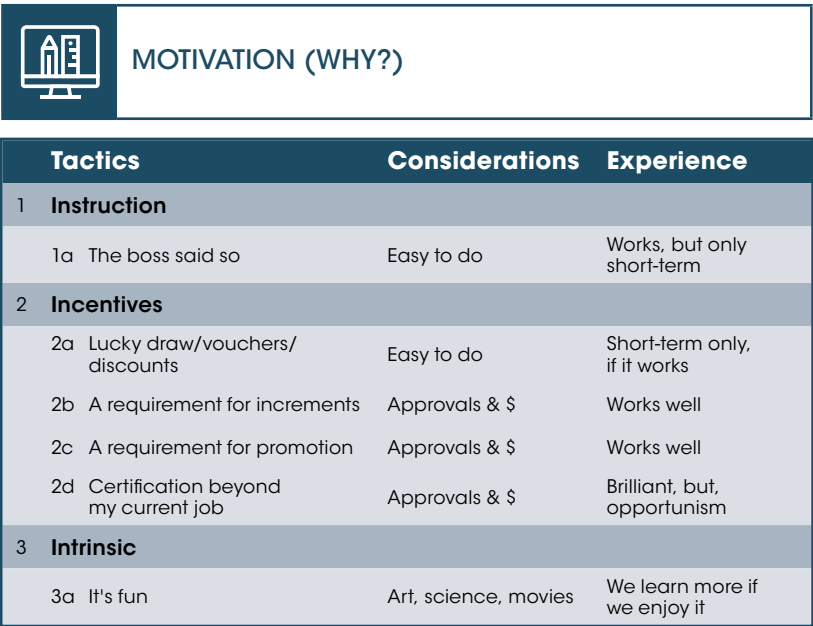


FIGURE 3

about products and services in a timely fashion, as opposed to training delivered via quarterly or annual training sessions.

Also, eLearning is important for retailers that sell high-priced items to a demanding clientele, because it is a very good platform to train employees on the attributes of a product. This is even more important in sectors where new products are introduced very often.

The ability to customise training is another huge edge that eLearning offers. Not every employee is at the same level of understanding, so it is important to create modules that can be customised for employees. IBM and Axonify, for example, use real-time analytics to understand employees based on how

they are using the corporation’s eLearning platforms in order to recommend modules for each employee.

Above all, corporations should keep in mind that the threesome of What-Why-How is a finely balanced system; if one element is off-kilter, the whole eLearning structure will come tumbling down.

**Kapil Tuli**  
*is Professor of Marketing and Director of the Retail Centre of Excellence at Singapore Management University*

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DFS’ EXPERIENCE WITH eLEARNING

In 2017, global airport retailer, DFS Group, decided it could not continue to train its employees the same old way anymore. Over the last two decades, the Group had invested significant resources in training, pouring money into DFS University and developing a raft of programmes that focused on building deep knowledge of the various luxury products sold by the Group.

Vanessa Teo, the Vice President of Global Learning and Talent Development at the DFS Group, elaborated on the company’s successes, “The business has transformed from being a commodity business to a luxury business—and with that transformation in your business model, there must also be a transformation of your people. Our sales associates are trained so that they want to build a relationship with every customer that comes through. So if a customer doesn’t buy today, he is ultimately still thinking about DFS and comes back to us.”

Although the approach worked, there was just one problem: It was expensive and trainer-dependent.

“Almost 100 percent of training was through in-person facilitation,” said Teo. “We have a learning and development (L&D) manager covering most of our 14 countries. Each country has one, maybe two trainers at most. I can’t be relying on just one person to ensure training is being delivered in a consistent manner every single time. In some cases, when an L&D manager decides to move on, or to move to a different part of our business, it leaves a hole in our business that is difficult to fill. We have gone for months at a time without delivering these programmes. That is just not sustainable.”

DFS first dipped its toe into the e-learning waters by creating an eCampus. This online social learning forum saw DFS employees posting articles, sharing ideas and commenting on classroom

topics. It was piloted at many locations, with the ambition that this social learning would reinforce existing training programmes. But Teo has more ambitious plans in mind, specifically virtual classrooms. “Turnover is high in the retail sector. New hire trainings are happening all the time. Is it possible to use one trainer to facilitate globally? A virtual classroom is totally within our reach. We want to do that too.” Teo’s proposal was met with resistance from headquarters. eLearning at DFS was relatively new and untested and senior managers needed more convincing before they could look past the development costs to embrace eLearning.

These costs for eLearning vary widely. At its simplest, written or audio/visual content could be translated into a digital format from existing materials and shared electronically through an existing enterprise portal system. This method could be very cheap. Development costs start to escalate when

more sophisticated methods are employed. For example, some forms of eLearning require customised software to be developed and integrated into an organisation’s IT structure.

Another challenge is selling eLearning to employees. Teo explained, “Developing the right kind of eLearning tools is in fact the most straightforward part of the challenge. Inspiring people to move into that digital mind space is where the real challenge is. It’s essentially an internal marketing problem.”

Teo understood that a complete transition to eLearning would undermine much of its current customer service training. However, not all aspects of the DFS University curriculum had to be taught with a hands-on pedagogy. Down the road, she envisioned digitising some of DFS’ learning content into something more scalable. If executed correctly, a mix of classroom learning with eLearning, a blended learning approach, would be as effective and more cost efficient in the long run.